

Testimony of
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Concerning HR 1814

Metacomet-Monadnock-Sunapee-Mattabesett Trail Study Act of 2001

MR. CHAIRMAN and members of the Committee, my name is Ann Colson. I am Director of Volunteers & Trails Coordinator for Connecticut Forest & Park Association, the private, nonprofit conservation organization that manages the 700-mile Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System in my beautiful state of Connecticut. I am here this morning to testify in favor of HR 1814, the Metacomet-Monadnock-Sunapee-Mattabesett Trail Study Act of 2001.

The Act specifies that a feasibility study be conducted for the potential addition to the National Trails System of the Metacomet-Monadnock-Sunapee-Mattabesett Trail extending approximately 260 miles through Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. I would like to address the Connecticut sections of this multi-state trail, and how they are an integral part of the envisioned 260-mile New England Trail.

Let me say at the outset that we have been extremely gratified by the overwhelming public response in favor of the proposed feasibility study. Letters of support from Connecticut town officials and land use agencies along the trail corridor, and from conservation organizations, trail managers, hiking groups, and individual trail users, along with the endorsement of the entire Connecticut Congressional Delegation, are all testimony to the support of HR 1814.

Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA), founded in 1895, established the first four of the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails in 1929, including the Metacomet Trail, which traverses the magnificent traprock ridges in the north central part of Connecticut. In 1932 the Mattabesett Trail was added, following the ridgeline south to Bluff Head in north Guilford.

When setting up the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System, the founding fathers also recognized the need for continuing trail maintenance and therefore established a corps of volunteers who would oversee the trails. In 1929 there were 250 miles of Blue-Blazed Trails. Today there are more than 700 miles. This growth could not have been sustained without the dedication of a veritable army of CFPA volunteers who build, manage, and maintain the trails throughout the year. Twelve trail managers are assigned to the combined 108 miles of the Mattabesett and Metacomet Trails, which are also overseen by the CFPA Trails Committee and supported by CFPA professional staff.

These two trails pass through the state's most diverse landscapes, from densely populated urban centers to cool, forested woodlands, streams and ponds, past picturesque agricultural fields, and atop sheer cliff faces offering sweeping views across Connecticut's central valley. On a clear day, hikers on the Metacomet Trail can see Long Island Sound to the south, and Mt. Tom in Massachusetts to the north. From Bluff Head, the 360-degree viewshed includes the distant city buildings of Hartford, our capitol city, and the shimmering blue expanse of Long Island Sound where it meets Connecticut's southern coast.

Unsurpassed beauty is not all that awaits the curious observer who hikes on these trails. Fragments of Connecticut's history can be found amongst the oaks and sugar maples and white pines - forgotten

cemeteries, tracks of former stagecoach routes, caves used by ancient Native American tribal councils, abandoned quarries, old cellar holes, and meandering rock walls. Off the Mattabesett Trail is a burial site, marked only by a circle of large stones, where the remains of smallpox victims were laid to rest. Further north, along the Metacomet Trail, a side trail brings hikers to "Hospital Rock," which bears the 1792 inscriptions of 66 smallpox victims. Scattered through the landscape are remnants of the charcoal mounds built by 19th century colliers who supplied charcoal for the state's once-thriving iron industry. The legacy of our nation's Civilian Conservation Corps remains in the bridges, dams, ponds, and lookout towers they constructed during the depression era of the 1930s, many of which are accessible along the trails. Hikers on the Metacomet Trail in Farmington can explore Will Warren's Den, a cave of huge jumbled rocks where Warren was hidden by Indians after he was flogged for not attending church and subsequently attempted to burn down the village of Farmington.

The trail corridors also harbor relatively undisturbed unique natural areas that provide critical habitat for a diverse range of animal and plant species. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Lamentation Mountain, across which the Mattabesett Trail runs, is the presence of two state threatened plant species (restricted information on file with the Natural Diversity Database of the Natural Resources Center, Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection). **Exhibit A**, attached to this testimony, describes Lamentation Mountain's natural communities, which are typical of those found on Connecticut's traprock ridge system, the 75-mile spine that is the framework for much of the Mattabesett Trail and the Metacomet Trail.

Today the trails themselves are threatened.

In the early- to mid-20th Century, permission to establish these footpaths was granted on the strength of a handshake by the farmers and woodlot owners whose land the trails crossed. Today, fully 75% of the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails System lies on private or quasi-public land, with only 25% of the trails located on state-owned lands. Those sections of trail that are on privately held property exist only through the kind permission of the landowner. Few, if any, legal agreements are in place. The heightened economy of recent years has encouraged explosive development, often on lands that were once considered marginal, such as the ridgetops. As development pressure increases, so does the very real threat of being unable to retain the trails' continuity and integrity for future generations of hikers.

In 1999, CFPA launched a comprehensive trails protection program aimed at providing permanent protection for the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System. The Metacomet and Mattabesett Trails are the initial focus of this important initiative, which involves working in partnership with all stakeholders along the trail corridors. Stakeholders include individual and corporate property owners, trail managers, local land trusts, municipal governing boards and land use agencies, regional planning agencies, and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, which has jurisdiction over the state's public forests and parks.

Our own research and trail protection efforts during the past two years speak loudly to the need for HR 1814, the Metacomet-Monadnock-Sunapee-Mattabesett Trail Study Act of 2001. I urge you to join with me and the entire Connecticut Congressional Delegation in support of HR 1814.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for recognizing me. I yield the floor to questions.

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